THE CONFESSION OF ST. PATRICK AND LETTER TO COROTICUS

John Skinner

Doubleday

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and

Letter to Coroticus

Translated and with notes by
John Skinner

Prologue by John O'Donohue

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For Lotty

O speciosissima atque amantissima filia quam in Χριsto genui.

—*Letter to Coroticus*

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Patrick's Lorica: Deer's Cry Fáeth Fiada

Prologue

History is an amazing presence—it is the place where vanished time gathers. While we are in the flow of time, it is difficult to glean its significance, and it is only in looking back that we can recognize the hidden dimensions at work within a particular era or epoch. St. Patrick has always been acknowledged as a pivotal figure in early Irish history and spirituality. Yet despite this importance, his significance has often become rather caricatured in legend and in the retrospective intentionality that nostalgia often confers. And yet we need not be limited by what legend has given us, since we are fortunate in having documents from Patrick's own hand.

The Confession of St. Patrick provides a window into a remarkable life. Patrick is a figure who inhabits a crucial threshold in the evolution and definition of Irish spirituality. To serve this threshold demanded a singular commitment that engaged every resource and depth of character he possessed. His story revolves around an initial irony which qualifies his centrality in the Irish tradition It was Irish pirates who kidnapped him from his British home and sold him into slavery here. They could never have suspected the spiritual tradition that would be born out of their brutal action.

Indeed, the structure of this initial moment sets the rhythm of Patrick's subsequent life, namely, the praxis of a spirituality of transfiguration. His physical slavery releases him into a life of inner liberation. His captors only controlled his tasks and location but they never got near the eternal spring that was awakening in his young mind.

Patrick understands his slavery as the door into divine recognition and friendship. In this awful experience of alienation and exile, he discovers God as his *anam-cara. Anam* is the Irish word for soul and *cara* is the word for friend. The *Anam-cara* is the Friend of the soul. This is one of the most beautiful concepts in the Celtic tradition. An ancient affinity and belonging awakened between two people in the *Anam-cara* relationship. This relationship cut across all other connections. In your *Anam-cara* you discovered the Other in whom your heart could be at home. The depth and shelter of this *Anam-cara* belonging enables Patrick to endure the most awful conditions. Prayer is conversation with his *Anam-cara:*

> But after I had come to Ireland,
>
> it was then that I was made to shepherd the flocks day after day, so, as I did so, I would pray all the time, right through the day. More and more the love of God and fear of him grew strong within me.
>
> and as my faith grew, so the Spirit became more and more active, so that in a single day I

would say as many as a hundred prayers, and at night only slightly less.

Although I might be staying in a forest or out on a mountainside, it would be the same;

even before dawn broke, I would be aroused to pray.

In snow, in frost, in rain,

I would hardly notice any discomfort,

and I was never slack but always full of energy.

It is clear to me now, that this was due to the fervor of the Spirit within me.

Pascal said that in difficult times you should always keep something beautiful in your heart. Patrick is able to survive these harsh and lonely territories of exile precisely because he keeps the beauty of God alive in his heart. The inner beauty of the divine intimacy transfigures outer bleakness.

This inner intimacy brings his soul alive. It opens the world of the divine imagination to this youth. Consequently, he becomes available for his destiny in a new way. His dreams invite him to ever richer thresholds of his future. He is shown in a dream a ship that will take him away from slavery. The lantern of his dream guides him through two hundred miles of hostile territory to a harbor where strange sailors unexpectedly relent and take him aboard ship. Fascinating relics of ancient traditions glisten through this phase of the narrative.

His parents and friends are delighted at his return. He studies and becomes a priest and bishop. Yet his destiny is not to remain among what is familiar or complacent. Again the dream calls him to journey toward the next threshold. It is the dream of a letter from Ireland full of the "Voice of the Irish" calling him to "come back and walk once more among us." Patrick allows himself to be guided by the "vision in his dreams." He is "pierced to the core" by this request.

It is fascinating that the crucial new direction in his life is not determined by the clear calculations of the daytime but rather originate in the voices of dream in the depth of the night. Often the most original disclosures assemble in the unconscious and are deciphered through imagination and dream. Patrick is so attuned to this deeper dimension of soul that his sense of who he is is rendered ever more complex by such new inner disclosures.

His sense of soul complexity finds its most fascinating expression in the frame-breaking experience that happens at that tender threshold somewhere between dream, prayer, and vision:

And on another night, "I do not know, only God knows"

whether in me or outside myself,

I heard the most wise words which

as yet I could not comprehend …

In the moment of deepest divine encounter, the frames of normal perception are radically extended and intensified. Yet in contrast to some Oriental mysticism, the sense of the intimacy and belonging

of the Self does not fade into anonymity of Nothingness:

> And once again, I saw him praying within my soul,
>
> it was as if I was still inside my body,
>
> and then I heard him above, me, that is over my inner man.

Patrick is amazed at this intrusion or more precisely extrusion from his own depths. This new presence is not himself but yet is radically at one with him:

> And as all this was happening, I was stunned and kept
>
> marveling and wondering …
>
> who he might be, who was praying in this wise within me.
>
> But as this prayer was ending, he declared that it was the Spirit.

Patrick discovers that the deepest experience of prayer is not the mere verbal intention of an isolated subject directed at a distant deity. The deepest prayer is beyond subjectivity and objectivity. It is the echo of the inner membrane where the human soul dovetails into the divine. This is reminiscent of what Eckhart terms the Birth of God in the soul. This event liberates Patrick from oppression of outer constraint by absolutely confirming the depth, authenticity, and expressiveness of the inner wellspring. He tells us:

> in such ways I have learned, by my own experience …

For any great spirit who must negotiate the great thresholds and indeed become a threshold the nourishment and sustenance of such inner confirmation is vital. He can travel on any dangerous or hostile outer journey because he knows he is at Home within. This is what sustains him in the lonely times of betrayal, misunderstanding, and scandal. Patrick is a strikingly modern figure in being ambivalent externally, however internally he inhabits the unity of innocence and authenticity. His singular independence is grounded in the sense of his own autonomy. It is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's statement: "Purity of heart is to will one thing."

Patrick's intimacy with the divine makes him painfully aware of his faults and unworthiness. Yet this recognition never becomes self-obsessive. He acknowledges that the tender mercy of God is deeper and more ultimate than mere human failing. His faults, therefore, do not become a barrier to either his destiny or growth. His difficulties with eros make Patrick real and interesting. They signal the charisma and passion of his personality and presence.

Patrick's presence is full of *uaisleacht*. The Irish word for nobility is *uaisleacht;* it also carries echoes of honor, dignity, and poise. Patrick exercised *uaisleacht* in relation to the people he shepherded. He served, defended, and cared for them, yet he refused any gifts or attempts to claim him. He also exercised *uaisleacht* in relation to his own destiny. He constructed no kingdom of the ego. He opened himself to the ultimate calling and challenge of Otherness in its social, territorial, and spiritual forms:

> For I know full well
>
> that poverty and adversity suit me better

than riches and delights.

The range and intensity of his inner and outer exposure is both admirable and fascinating. Only a great soul could engage such otherness and still remain gentle and free.

A threshold is a place where different territories meet. Patrick is a great threshold. In him the pre-Christian and Christian dimensions of the Irish sensibility find an acute and balanced tension. Frequently in the *Confessions* we sense this meeting. Near the end he aligns the pre-Christian Celtic sense of the divinity of the sun with Christ: "the true sun … who will never die." In the *Lorica* attributed to Patrick, even though it comes three centuries later, we find a lovely balance of the pre-Christian and the Christian.

The *Lorica* derives its particular nuance from the absolute recognition of the omnipresence of God. The new day is understood as a gift of the divine. The very energy of awakening and arising is made possible by the love and care of God. Whatever the day holds is welcome because the ultimate origin and destination of the day is divinity. It explicitly recognizes the day in the light of the Trinitarian embrace. A day is no mere segment of anonymous and contingent time. A day is full of latent divinity:

I arise today

in a mighty strength

calling upon the Trinity,

believing in the Three Persons

saying they are One

thanking my creator.

This lyrical and direct evocation of the Trinity is then followed by a recognition of the Christological depth of our experience. Next the forces of the invisible world that secretly contribute to our destiny and experience are named and invoked. Then he names the elements and acknowledges how their latent divinity calls the individual forth out of the night into the energy and celebration of life:

I arise today

through strength in the sky:

light of the sun

moon's reflection

dazzle of fire

speed of lightning

wild wind

deep sea

firm earth

hard rock

The secret faithfulness of landscape is recognized here. It provides the where without which no life or object could exist.

Patrick draws constant attention to his rustic and unlearned sensibility. The depth and probe of his writings belie this. Yet it is true that the exploration and refinement of theological connections and nuance is neither his objective nor gift. Yet in his writings the pre-Christian and the Christian are always adjacent. Close enough to allow us to explore their embrace and recognize here a latent/nascent theology of Creation. A Celtic theology of Creation understands such continuity and interflow as vital, rich, and liberating.

—John O'Donohue
Conamara, Ireland

Preface to *Letter to Coroticus*

Patrick, the bishop apostle of Ireland, left us only two writings from his own hand: *Letter to Coroticus* and *Confession*. At first glance both documents speak eloquently enough for themselves; yet with closer scrutiny we can learn a very great deal more about Patrick the man and his mission. The first is a passionate plea against a gang of pirates for the return of a large number of young converts whom they have taken into slavery; the second, written when Patrick was an old man, is both a thanksgiving to God for his life and a justification of his mission to the Irish answering the bishops of Britain. At once we are plunged into the present day!

In order to begin to understand these writings, we must start by asking about their style and why Patrick wrote. It is said of Augustine, that hungry for wisdom he at last picked up the Bible—only to be bitterly disappointed. It was not at all as he had expected. Purpose begets style, style betrays meaning.

What has come to be known as *A Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* began as a reaction to an especially violent and ruthless act of murder and rape. Patrick describes how he had just baptized and confirmed a large group of young men and women, when on the very next day, the chrism "still gleaming upon their foreheads, they were cruelly cut down and killed." Those that resisted faced instant death; the remainder were taken prisoner—the men into slavery, the women to endure a lifetime of sexual abuse at the hands of the pagan Picts. The perpetrator of this act of barbarism was well known, a chief from Britain called Coroticus. What angers Patrick more even than the brutal savagery of this crime is that its perpetrators are Christian. His final impassioned statement stands today as a cry to heaven against all such outrages against humanity; it also tells us a great deal about the humanity of the man who first wrote it over fifteen hundred years ago.

Patrick's immediate response to this bloody tragedy is to send a delegation of priests "with a letter" after Coroticus (who must still have been around in Ireland), led by a priest whom Patrick could trust especially since "I had taught him from his boyhood." But nothing came of this: When Patrick's delegation met up with the raiding party, they demanded return of booty, especially the release of the young women captives. Coroticus's soldiers merely laughed in the priests' faces. The bishop then deliberates on a second course of action; Coroticus must be publicly named and shamed for his crime. Patrick decides on a secondary strike against these "bloody men," "rebels against Christ" who "have filled their houses with the spoils of dead Christians" and "given away girls like prizes." In a new and more formal document, which he describes as "chiseled out in Latin," he shapes a more considered plea. It is clear that his first hasty letter has been lost to us. Addressed only indirectly to Coroticus, this ultimate fulmination is intended to broadcast as widely as possible his infamy, to warn local Christians that they must stand clear of this bully chief. Patrick chooses his words as arrows. He is not about to let Coroticus go free. His shout must be the very first cry against slavery in the history of our race.

It becomes the most public pillory imaginable: in all but name, an excommunication. And this before the Internet. The important point to remember is that the society of Patrick's day was almost exclusively oral. Although he writes this formal letter in Latin, intending it to be read out in public at

some future stage—over and over again—even as he composes it, word of his anger would have spread out among Patrick's Christians and carried to the people at large, ahead of any letter arriving at the camp of Coroticus. Such was Patrick's plan. Reading his letter, we can feel certain the bolt from his sling carried.

At first sight, Patrick's style is rushed, urgent at times to the point of incoherence. Scholars, and there have been a very great number over the past fifty years laboring to divine Patrick's innermost mind and heart, have fastened on the saint's own self-confessed "rusticity." They have inspected his Latin and found it to fall well short of Cicero's. But, of course, Patrick was no Cicero and the Latin he wrote was Old Latin, the difference between pottery and porcelain. The result is that given a number of critical readings in the text where there is ambiguity, translations can differ widely, almost depending upon the individual whim of the translator. This translator seeks only one end: to offer Patrick to the modern reader man-toman. And in many ways the task is made simpler because Patrick communicates in a vivid and personal way. Self-effacing he may be, but carrying the burden of his message, he ends up by giving us himself, a recognizable, lovable, passionate bishop who is jealous of his people's good.

A recent book of immense energy and originality has revealed a different Patrick, far from "rustic and untaught." David Howlett (*The Book of Letters of Saint Patrick the Bishop*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994) has demonstrated beyond any doubt that Patrick's lumpy Latin style was merely the natural result of a strict chiastic structure, adopted partly to solemnize his promulgation and partly to make it almost impossible to copy imperfectly.

Until very recently, the nomadic peoples of Somalia were entirely oral. (It was another learned and devoted Irishman who fashioned their first alphabet, thus enabling their numerous narrative stories to be written down after generations of purely oral tradition.) In such a culture the storyteller is a man of power. The people listen to him above all others. But they listen carefully. If he so much as makes one slip of the tongue, they beat the ground with their sticks and make such a clamor that he must retrieve the story and retell it exactly as he told it last time around. In a similar way, Patrick's chiastic structure with its many mirrored repeats and complementary echoes throughout the text protect and safeguard it as it sets out on its journey of transmission across the desks of countless copyists down the centuries.

Howlett's analysis is painstaking and detailed, but a brief description must be offered here. He discerns the *Letter* to have four parts. Each part can be folded upon itself to reveal balanced references in passages that parallel each other so as to emphasize and develop Patrick's argument. The structure appears even more admirable as Howlett uncovers a further complexity: Patrick employs the Golden Section and subjects his entire writing to a rigorous word count. Quite simply, each word is like a tiny piece of mosaic lowered in to fit the text at the precise—and unique—point where it shows up the picture's visual meaning when seen from a distance.

One might liken Patrick's complex writing plan to the art of the shipwright. In order to construct a vessel that is both seaworthy and strong, he first lays a keel. To this, ribs are attached. Each rib not only has an exact partner opposite, port mirroring starboard, but is equally related to its immediate neighbor on either side, fore and aft. Moreover, any shipwright has known from ancient days how a bluff stem must subtly relate to the line of the stern, mimicking whale or dolphin to give the best dynamic shape for his ship's chosen purpose.

Patrick is clearly no common and garden rustic. Even he allows himself the aside that now he is attempting in his old age something he never quite mastered as a boy!

It is impossible to replicate such literary devices in translation without making the modern reader's life (and that of the translator) a misery. But we ought at least to recognize why such a purposeful structure is there in Patrick's Latin. It may no longer serve us any purpose, yet, in his day, it would have been recognized at once—and marveled at—as Patrick's letter was read aloud up and down Ireland and across the water in Britain, where it eventually must have shamed even the bold Coroticus and troubled the bishops of Britain.

Patrick was a "man of one book" who ate, drank, and dreamed his Latin Bible. Practically every line of his writings contains a Bible phrase or quotation. Again, some scholars have wrongly interpreted this symptom as betraying a woeful lack of Latin vocabulary. Short on words, Patrick would lurch for some Bible tag to keep the conversation going like some tourist flicking through a phrase book. Quite the opposite. The Bible was *his* book. He used it all the time. It came to his tongue as naturally as his newly won language, Gaelic. Moreover, it served his task in life: "If I have any worth, it is to live my life for God so as to teach these peoples" (*Coroticus*, Chapter 1).

And so the Bible's rhythm had become his own: the chiastic paired statements that characterize so much of Old and New Testament books, as in the opening of John's Gospel, find their echo in Patrick's writings like some lonely bell buoy tolling the entrance to a safe harbor.

> In the beginning was the Word:
>
> the Word was with God
>
> and the Word was God.
>
> He was with God in the beginning.
>
> Through him all things came to be,
>
> not one thing had its being but through him.
>
> And all that came to be had life in him
>
> and that life was the light of men.

John 1:1–4

or again:

> The spirit of the Lord Yahweh has been given to me,
>
> for Yahweh has anointed me.
>
> He has sent me to bring good news to the poor,
>
> to bind up hearts that are broken;
>
> to proclaim liberty to captives,
>
> freedom to those in prison;
>
> to proclaim a year of favor from Yahweh,
>
> a day of vengeance for our God.

Isaiah 63:1–2

Patrick could have found plenty of straight words with which to chastise Coroticus. Yet he is more subtle. He constantly uses the Bible, not through any poverty of his own, but as a golfer will choose

the exact iron, a swordsman achieve his deft mark in a sudden thrust with his rapier. Woe betide Coroticus when he hears his doom:

> "The Almighty turns away from the gifts of wicked men."
>
> "He who offers sacrifice from the goods of the poor, is like a man who sacrifices a son in the sight of his own father."
>
> "Those riches," it is written, "which he has gathered in unjustly will be vomited out of his belly."
>
> "And now the angel of death comes to drag him away.
>
> He will be mauled by angry dragons,
>
> killed by the serpent's tongue.
>
> Moreover, everlasting fire is consuming him."

Letter, Chapter 8

Patrick's quotations, exclusively from the Bible, are "signaled" (thus) in the text and exact references listed below each chapter. Each one is worth the reader mulling over, for each is a deliberately chosen stepping-stone in his argument that echoes plausibly to his footfall. To take one at random will illustrate both Patrick's own deliberateness and the validity in dwelling on every one of his chosen texts.

In Chapter 10 he publicly scrutinizes his motives in coming to Ireland and immediately uses Paul's self-description, "I am a prisoner of the Spirit." This comes in Acts 20, when Paul is taking his leave of the elders at Ephesus before heading for Jerusalem. He hopes to arrive there in time for Pentecost and give an account of his mission "to the pagans"; he is also certain that he will be arrested there and have to face the gravest danger. "I have served the Lord in all humility," he tells the church, "teaching and instructing you in your homes … doing everything possible to help you." Patrick identifies with Paul. He, too, has come into a distant land. Just as Paul sees his unique mission to preach to Gentile and Jew alike, so Patrick has been sent to Ireland, a "barbarian" land, that is outside the Roman Empire. It, too, is full of pagans, country tribes whom no one in their right mind regards as civilized or capable of decent human commerce. But "prisoners of the Spirit" cannot choose in such matters; they are compelled by Christ's urging to bring his word to a new people at whatever cost to themselves, even to death itself. "Life," as Paul tells the men of Ephesus, "is not worth wasting words on.…"

Before offering readers a chance to savor for themselves Patrick's impassioned protest against Coroticus, it might prove helpful to offer a broad summary of his life and his approximate dates. One enters such a seeming slight endeavor with trepidation, aware of contradiction at any moment. The whole Patrician edifice of scholarship remains immensely active, active as in volcano. Its founding father, Ludwig Bieler, whose critical edition of Patrick's writings (from six manuscripts that have become dispersed into the libraries of Europe) still stands as cornerstone. But as with all things religious—and Irish—great divisions repeatedly appear. These at times threaten to undermine the veracity of their findings simply because some scholars will bring excess baggage to their labors.

Under this caveat, let it be simply said:

Patrick was born in Roman Britain toward the end of the fourth century. His father was influential and wealthy, holding the office of decurion—that is to say, civil magistrate and tax collector. His father was also a deacon, Patrick adds, while his grandfather was a priest. So the family was solidly Christian as well as Latin-speaking British Roman citizens. The spiritual office of deacon would have mitigated some of the more onerous obligations of his father's tax collecting. Normally, such men had to make good from their own wealth any shortfall, but officers of the church were under no obligation from any such uncollected taxes. Patrick tells us that he himself was neither saint nor scholar; he had "turned his back on God" and "did not learn in the same way as others."

As he was nearing the age of sixteen, he was seized by Irish pirates in a wholesale raid and together with "many thousands" was taken and sold into slavery. For the next six years Patrick is a common herdsman on a bleak hillside somewhere in Ireland. (One favored site is the Slemish mountains near Larne in modern-day county Antrim, Northern Ireland. An alternative would be on the farther west coast of Mayo near Killala, which would explain its proximity to Croagh Patrick. But it is not our object to dwell upon the romance of Patrick, rather upon Patrick the man.) Here, he tells us, he learned to pray: "In a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and at night only slightly fewer" (*Confession*, Chapter 16). The young lad who had suddenly lost family and country found his way to God: "It was he who strengthened me, consoling me just as a father comforts his son."

But then, one night, Patrick dreams. A voice calls to him, "Come and see where your ship is waiting." So the slave slips away: He travels the length of Ireland, traipsing two hundred miles (*ducenta milia passus*—Patrick's Latin makes it sound as if he counted each step of his dangerous journey). At last he reaches the coast just as a ship is being let into the water. With difficulty he persuades the sailors to allow him passage and so makes his escape into the unknown. There is a curiously arresting phrase at this point as Patrick tells his story: "I refused to suck their nipples for I feared God and would not fall in with their pagan ways" (*Confession*, Chapter 18). Commentators now agree that this startling custom (presumably a token gesture similar to our own social kissing) was recognized among the Celts, and employed partly as male bonding, partly in recognition of dependence.

After three days and nights (which would take them to Gaul, although Patrick never thinks to add this detail), they land and trek inland "through a land that was completely barren." Several questions arise: Who were these "sailors" who left their ship and set out purposefully into an unknown, "barren" land? One explanation is that they were traders with a valuable cargo of Irish wolfhounds, much prized in Gaul as the perfect hunting dog. This rests on an uncertain reading of one word, *carnes* (flesh) or *canes* (dogs). Another, less likely, is that they were raiders—although Patrick makes no suggestion that they were warriors and it seems unlikely that he would have wanted to join such a party. Their journey becomes almost impossible as they run out of food. And their leader turns to Patrick to use his strange Christian powers to provide food. There follows the only account of an apparent wonder worked by Patrick: He tells them to trust in his God, who will provide all that they need. And suddenly a herd of pigs crosses their path and there is food aplenty.

We then hear from Patrick about a brief return home when pressure was brought upon him to take up his heritage once more as a middle-class British boy. But God calls him a second time. He has a dream summoning him back to Ireland. "I seemed to hear 'the Voice of the Irish,' the voice of the same men who lived beside the forest of Foclut, which lies near the Western sea where the sun sets" (*Confession*, Chapter 23).

His mind is also set: he must catch up, with difficulty, on his books. We can guess with some degree of certainty that he returns to Gaul and falls under the spell of Germanus, bishop of Auxerre. His learning difficulties may have been as much due to temperament as to ability; Patrick was clearly an athlete and outdoorsman, restless in his youth when his task was to pick through endless books. But we know two things for certain: He read his Bible and he prayed. He also persevered in his dream to return to Ireland but was continually frustrated by his superiors.

When eventually he did return, it was as bishop charged with consolidating the slender hold Christianity had upon the barbarian tribes, the Scotti, who, together with the Picts, were already colonizing the immediate adjacent British coasts of Pembrokeshire and Strathclyde.

We know little about his mission except that it was solidly successful. Though Patrick almost certainly exercised his ministry in the northeast of Ireland, making Armagh his center of operations, his influence and achievements were permanent. He believed in learning, he brought the people books and a new language, Latin. Within a hundred years of his death they had devised their own Celtic alphabet and set about recording their numerous heroic narrative tales. But above all he brought them God, the God that was Three and One to give them a lasting legacy of the Christian faith and shape the future of their nation.

One of the treasured relics said to have belonged to Patrick—if one might admit the slightest whiff of myth—is the reliquary case in which his mass bell was once kept. We can imagine Patrick rousing his flock with a clanking cowbell and inviting them to come to his morning Eucharist. The bell has long since disappeared, but more precious by far is the sound of his very own words ringing across fifteen centuries.

A Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus

Part I

1

I am Patrick, yes a sinner and indeed untaught; yet I am established here in Ireland where I profess myself bishop.

I am certain in my heart that “all that I am,” I have received from God.

So I live among barbarous tribes,

a stranger and exile for the love of God.

He himself testifies that this is so.

I never would have wanted these harsh words to spill from my mouth; I am not in the habit of speaking so sharply.

Yet now I am driven by the zeal of God, Christ’s truth has aroused me.

I speak out too for love of my neighbors who are my only sons;

for them I gave up my home country, my parents and even pushing my own life to the brink of death.

If I have any worth, it is to live my life for God so as to teach these peoples;

even though some of them still look down on me.

I Cor. 15:10, Phil. 2:30

2

I myself have composed and written these words with my own hand, so that

they can be given and handed over, then sent swiftly to the soldiers of

Coroticus.

I am not addressing my own people, nor my fellow citizens of the holy

Romans, but those who are now become citizens of demons by reason of

their evil works.

They have chosen, by their hostile deeds, to live in death;

comrades of the Scotti and Picts and of all who behave like apostates,

bloody men who have steeped themselves in the blood of innocent Christians.

The very same people I have begotten for God; their number beyond count, I myself confirmed them in Christ.

3

The very next day after my new converts, dressed all in white, were anointed with chrism,

even as it was still gleaming upon their foreheads, they were cruelly cut down and killed by the swords of these same devilish men.

At once I sent a good priest with a letter.

I could trust him, for I had taught him from his boyhood.

He went, accompanied by other priests,

to see if we might claw something back from all the looting, most important,

the baptized captives whom they had seized.

Yet all they did was to laugh in our faces at the mere mention of their prisoners.

4

Because of all this, I am at a loss to know whether to weep more for those they killed

or those that are captured: or indeed for these men themselves

whom the devil has taken fast for his slaves.

In truth, they will bind themselves alongside him in the pains of the everlasting pit:

for “he who sins is a slave already” and is to be called “son of the devil.”

Jn. 8:34, 44 (O.L.)

5

Because of this, let every God-fearing man mark well that to me they are outcasts:

cast out also by Christ my God, whose ambassador I am.

Patricides, they are, yes and fratricides, no better than ravening wolves devouring God's own people like a loaf of bread.

Exactly as it says: "the wicked have scattered your law, O Lord,"

which in these latter days he had planted in Ireland with so much hope and goodness;

here it had been taught and nurtured in God's sight.

Eph. 6:20, Acts 20:29, Ps. 14:4, Ps. 119:126

Part II

6

I do not overreach myself,

for I too have my part to play

with “those whom he has called to himself and predestined” to teach the gospel

in the midst of considerable persecutions “as far as the ends of the earth,”

even if the enemy reveals his true envy through the tyranny of Coroticus,

who fears neither God nor the priests whom he has chosen and to whom he has given the highest divine power,

namely that “those whom they bind on earth are bound in heaven.”

Rom. 8:30, Matt. 16:19

7

Accordingly, I beseech especially you “holy and humble in heart,” that it is

unlawful to flatter men like these,

nor should you eat or drink in their company,

neither should anyone feel any obligation to receive alms from such men;

not until the time comes when they do penances so harsh that their tears pour out to God,

and that they agree to free those servants of God and the baptized

handmaids of Christ.

For these did he die, for them was he crucified.

Dan. 3:87

8

“The Almighty turns away from the gifts of wicked men.”

“He who offers sacrifice from the goods of the poor, is like a man who sacrifices a son in the sight of his own father.”

“Those riches,” it is written, “which he has gathered in unjustly will be vomited out of his belly.”

“And now the angel of death comes to drag him away.

He will be mauled by angry dragons,

killed by the serpent’s tongue.

Moreover, everlasting fire is consuming him.”

So, “Woe to those who feast themselves on things that are not their own.”

Or, “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole World

and suffers the loss of his own soul?”

Ecclus. 34:19–20, Job 20:15–16, 26 Hab. 2:6, Matt. 16:26

9

It would take too long to discuss or argue every single case,

or to sift through the whole of the Law for precise witness against such greed.

Sufficient to say, greed is a deadly deed.

You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

You shall not murder.

A homicide may not stand beside Christ.

Even "He who hates his brother is to be labeled murderer."

Or, "He who does not love his brother dwells in death."

Therefore how much more guilty is he,

who has stained his own hands in the blood of the sons of God,

those very children whom only just now he has won for himself in this distant land by means of our feeble encouragement.

Rom. 13:9 Exod. 20:13, 17 I Jn. 3:15, 14

Part III

10

Could I have come to Ireland without thought of God, merely in my own interest?

Who was it made me come?

For here “I am a prisoner of the Spirit” so that I may not see any of my family.

Can it be out of the kindness of my heart that I carry out such a labor of mercy on a people

who once captured me

when they wrecked my father’s house and carried off his servants?

For by descent I was a freeman,

born of a decurion father;

yet I have sold this nobility of mine,

I am not ashamed, nor do I regret that it might have meant some advantage to others.

In short, I am a slave in Christ to this faraway people for the indescribable glory of “everlasting life

which is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Acts 20:22, Rom. 6:23

11

And if my own do not want to know me,

well and good, “a prophet is not honored in his own country.”

Indeed, perhaps we are not “from the same sheepfold,”

or possibly we do not have “one and the same Father for our God.”

As he says, “He who is not with me, is against me”

and he who “does not gather with me, scatters.”

We are at cross purposes:

“One destroys; another builds.”

“I do not seek things that are mine.”

Not by my grace, but it is God “who has given such care in my heart,”

so that I should be among “the hunters or fishers” whom God foretold “in those final days.”

Jn. 4:44, Jn. 10:16, Eph. 4:6, Matt. 12:30, Ecclus. 34:23, I Cor. 13:5, II Cor. 8:16

12

They are jealous of me.

What am I to do, Lord?

How bitterly they despise me!

Just see how your sheep are torn apart and despoiled,

and by those gangsters I have named, bound to the last man by the inimical mind of Coroticus.

Far away from the love of God is the man who betrays my Christians into the hands of the Scotti and Picts.

"Ravenous wolves" have gulped down the Lord's own flock,

which was flourishing in Ireland and tended with utmost care.

Now I have lost count how many sons and daughters of the kings of the Scotti have become monks and virgins of Christ.

For which reason, "may these injuries done to the just not find favor in your sight,"

even "to the lowest depths of hell may you not be pleased."

Matt. 7:15, Ecclus. 9:12

13

Which of the saints would not refuse to feast and decline the company of such men?

See how they have filled their houses with the spoils of dead Christians?

Why, they devote their lives to plunder!

Miserable men, they have no idea how they feed poison, food that surely kills, to their friends and even to their own children;

just as Eve never realized that she was handing out certain death to her own man, her husband.

It is always the same with those who do evil:

they labor long only to yield death as their everlasting punishment.

14

Roman Christians in Gaul behave quite differently:

it is their custom to send holy, capable men to the Franks and other nations

with several thousand *solidi* so as to redeem Christian prisoners;

yet you would rather kill or sell them on to a far-off tribe who know nothing of the true God.

You might as well consign Christ's own members to a whorehouse.

What kind of hope can you have left in God?

Can you still trust someone who says he agrees with you?

Do you listen still to all those flatterers who surround you?

God alone will judge.

For it is written, "Not only those who do evil,

but also all those who agree with them, are to be damned."

Rom. 1:32

15

For myself, I do not know “what I shall say,” or how “I may speak anymore” of those who are dead

—of these children of God—

whom the sword has struck down so harshly, beyond all belief.

For it is written, “Weep with those that weep,”

and again “If one member grieves,

then all members should grieve together.”

Because of this, the whole Church “cries out and laments for its sons and daughters”

who so far have not been killed by the sword.

For they have been taken far away and abandoned

in a land where sin abounds, openly, wickedly, impudently;

there freeborn men are sold,

Christians are reduced to slavery,

and worst of all among the most worthless and vilest apostates, the Picts.

Jn. 12:49, Rom. 12:15, I Cor. 12:26, Matt. 2:18; Jer. 31:15

16

Because of all this, my voice is raised in sorrow and mourning.

Oh, my most beautiful, my lovely brethren and my sons

“whom I begot in Christ,”

I have lost count of your number,

what can I do to help you now?

I am not worthy to come to the help of God or men.

“We have been overwhelmed by the wickedness of unjust men,”

it is as if “we had been made outsiders.”

They find it unacceptable that we are Irish

But it says “Is it not true that you all have but one God?

Why then have you, each one of you, abandoned your own neighbor?”

I Cor. 4:15, Ps. 65:3, Ps. 69:8, Eph. 4:5, 6, Mal. 2:10

Part IV

17

And therefore I grieve for you,
how I mourn for you, who are so very dear to me,
but again I can rejoice within my heart,
not for nothing “have I labored,”
neither has my exile been “in vain.”
And if this wicked deed, so horrible, so unutterable, had to happen,
thanks be to God, as men, believing and baptized,
you have left this world behind for paradise.
I can see you all clearly:
you have set out for where “there will be no more night,”
“no more lament, neither death.”
“There your hearts will leap, like calves let free from the tether,
and you will trample down the wicked underfoot,
and they will be like dust under your feet.”

Phil. 2:16, Apoc. 22:5; 21:4, Mal. 4:2, 3

18

Therefore will you reign with the apostles and the prophets and all the martyrs.

You will attain the eternal kingdoms.

Just as he testifies, exactly as he declares:

“They will come from East and the West,

and they will rest with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”

“While outside howl the dogs, the poisoners, the homicides,”

and “Their fate, with liars and perjurers, is the lake of everlasting fire.”

Where, says the Apostle, not without reason, “The just man will scarcely be saved,

yet the sinner and the flagrant lawbreaker, where shall he stand?”

Matt. 8:11, Apoc. 22:15, Apoc. 21:8, I Pet. 4:18

19

And so, now you, Coroticus—and your gangsters,

rebels all against Christ, now where do you see yourselves?

You gave away girls like prizes: not yet women, but baptized.

All for some petty temporal gain that will pass in the very next instant.

“Like a cloud passes, or smoke blown in the wind,”

so will “sinners, who cheat, slip away from the face of the Lord.

But the just will feast for sure” with Christ.

“They will judge the nations” and unjust kings “they will lord over” for world after world. Amen.

Wisd. 5:14, Ps. 68:2, 3; 3:8

20

I bear witness before God and his angels that this will come about,
just as he has revealed my lack of learning.
To repeat: these are not my words,
but God's own words—and the apostle's and the prophets',
which I have merely chiseled out in Latin:
and they have never lied.
"He who is found to have believed will be saved;
but he who did not believe will be condemned,
God has spoken."

Mk. 16:15, 16

21

My chief request is that anyone who is a servant of God be ready and willing, to carry this letter forward;

may it never be hidden or stolen by anyone,

but rather, may it be read aloud before the whole people—

Yes, even when Coroticus himself is present.

May God inspire these men sometime to come to their senses in regard to God again,

so that they may repent, however latter day, of their grave crimes,

namely homicide against the brothers of the Lord,

and that they free these baptized women whom they have taken,

so that then they may deserve to live to God

and be made whole once more,

here, now and for eternity.

Peace to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. *AMEN*.

Preface to *The Confession of Bishop Patrick*

We come now to the second, far more substantial, writing from the hand of Patrick, the bishop. Its form bears many similarities to his *Letter to Coroticus*. It, too, is chiastic in structure and shot through with telling quotations from Scripture. Its purpose was to offer a formal and studied reply to a dispute that had arisen between Patrick's mission in Ireland and the British bishops. Quite simply, was he the man for the job? We cannot be certain what prompted such open hostility; there clearly appears to have been some kind of formal synod in which Patrick's ability was in question and at which a certain sin of his youth was paraded in public. Patrick was not present: The outcome is unsure. But at some later date he issues his formal reply that broadens into a justification of his whole life's work in Ireland. It makes noble reading, since in it Patrick lays bare his soul—"I want my brothers and my family to know my mettle, so that they may clearly recognize the set of my soul" (Chapter 6).

Yet it was written when Patrick was an old man; and there is a strong counterpoint to the main theme, the thrust of answering his critics. For this defense brief also serves as his last will and testament. In Chapter 4, just as he is getting into his stride, Patrick launches into an almost liturgical-sounding credo. It has led some commentators to suggest that this was in fact just that, an early Celtic liturgy. It is a theory I would repudiate. As death became ever more present to him as a daily reality, Patrick wanted to sum his life story.

> "Because there is no other God nor ever was
>
> nor will be in future days,
>
> other than God who is unbegotten Father …"

Here is Patrick's summary of the gospel he has given to the Irish, the news of the Trinitarian God whose loving intervention in their history is to change their ways. Not that Patrick claims to be anything other than a poor instrument in such a drama. "I do not believe in my own powers. 'I well know in part' why I have not led a perfect life, just like other believers, but still I confess my Lord, and I do not blush for shame in his sight. Neither do I lie, for I have known him from my youth, and the love of God and the fear of him have grown in me, 'and up till now,' by God's goodwill, 'I have kept the faith' " (Chapter 44).

Such formally personalized credos were to become more common in the early to later Middle Ages. We have a beautiful example of one composed by Bruno, founder of the Carthusians, which would have been recited on his deathbed.

Bible scholars like talking about the *Sitz-im-Leben* of their text, its life-situation, that is to say, how did it come to be written, while historians now view the individual against the stage kings claim to have set. And we must do as much for Patrick.

He lived in a melting-pot world that was at once fascinating and frightening. The Roman Empire had just imploded upon itself, no longer able to carry the weight of running the world's affairs. After seven centuries, the unthinkable had happened: In 410, the civilized world looked on with dread as

Alaric and his Gothic army sacked Rome. “If Rome can perish,” Jerome commented pithily from Jerusalem, “who can be safe.”

Citizens of substance cashed up and ran. The learnedly entertaining historian, Peter Brown, writing about Patrick’s contemporary Augustine of Hippo, describes these Roman refugees descending upon Jerusalem somewhat like the White Russians who came to Paris in the 1920s, “a community with a liveliness and a capacity for resentment.” Among their number came one Pelagius, like Patrick, a Briton but long since settled in Rome. A monk with a mission, Pelagius was intensely active in seeking perfection—for himself and others. In many ways he was the Charles Wesley of his day. On hearing Augustine’s saying from *The Confessions, “Da quod iubes, et iube quod vis,”* “Give us what you command, and then say whatever you want us to do,” Pelagius exploded. Was not this to undermine the whole of the moral order. (Augustine had been describing his inner wrestling with the agony of chastity: “Give it me, but not yet …”). Pelagius was stirred to propound what was soon to become a popular and much-admired teaching: Man has a free will which is his solemn duty to exercise. He must choose good and reject evil. This soon became bowdlerized by his opponents to declare that man could save his soul by his own efforts.

Now he came in person to Carthage and even to Augustine’s see at Hippo, though the two never met face-to-face. For presently he joined the fashionable throng in Jerusalem, where his teaching seemed to fit the order of the day. Augustine had just recently dealt decisively with the Donatists, a wholesale church row that had meant sacking several hundred bishops. Old man he might be, but he could still, in the “cause of grace,” go for the jugular. Now was the moment to tackle Pelagius. Yet it took time and for a while it almost seemed that Pelagius might win the day. But suddenly the heretic was condemned by imperial rescript. It almost seemed some kind of divine intervention acting independently of both parties. Yet its timing came too late to include the bishops of Britain, who were now, after the fall of Rome, beyond its pale. The bishops of Gaul responded anxiously to this continuing British adherence to Pelagian ways. And their nervousness was shared by Rome. Soon, at the initiative of pope’s deacon Palladius, Germanus, the learned bishop of Auxerre, was sent to Britain to parlay. Pope Celestine’s view of orthodoxy was listened to politely but apparently to no avail. (At a later date he would return to Britain on the same errand. This time he raised an army to combat the Scotti and the Picts, teaching them the singular war cry “alleluia.” And as a result, his message proved more acceptable.)

At this point we should catch up with Patrick. Although he never tells us directly, we can be fairly certain that sometime after his return to his family home, he set out for Gaul once more. He found his way to Auxerre, where Germanus had a fine school that nurtured future priests. It could have been there (others favor Lérins, an island off the South of France close to modern-day Cannes) that Patrick was made deacon and on the eve of his ordination confessed his shameful sin to his best friend (Chapter 27). All the while he labored at his books, Patrick’s heart was set upon one thing, his return to Ireland. His dream (Chapter 23) names Victoricius as his postman “carrying countless letters, one of which he handed over …” It is entirely appropriate that Victoricius should convey to Patrick “the voice of the Irish,” calling him back to “the forest of Foclut beside the Western sea where the sun sets.” Bishop Victoricius had of his own initiative preached to the Belgian barbarians on the borders of his own diocese; as such, he was the first bishop to venture outside the Roman Empire to teach Christ’s word.

Pope Celestine now appointed Palladius himself as “first bishop to the Irish Christians.” An extraordinary step: Not since Paul had taken it upon himself to preach to the Gentiles had a bishop been appointed to carry the gospel beyond the Roman Empire’s known boundaries. But such boundaries were now beginning to fade as a fond memory. The church had to look to its own initiatives. Uppermost in Celestine’s mind in sending his chief priest in Rome to “the ends of the earth” (Chapter 38) was to put down an orthodox marker within sight of Britain. He might have failed to win his way with the British bishops, but he could still attempt to influence them.

We know little of the progress of the mission by Palladius. There are whispers of success in Leinster, but nothing of substance that a historian might put his name to. All we do know is that his time in Ireland, if he ever got there, was brief.

And now we return once more to Patrick. Germanus had already used his influence to appoint him as missionary priest to the land of his heart's desire, when news of the death of Palladius caused a sudden change of plan. Patrick was now appointed bishop to Ireland. "I was like some great stone lying in the mud," he muses (Chapter 12), but now "he raised me up and placed me on the very top of the wall. Because of that I must shout aloud to the Lord in order to give back something for all his gifts.…"

Whatever the direct cause of Patrick's confrontation with his "elders" (Chapter 26), the bishops of Britain—and some scholars have suggested it was his excommunication of Coroticus—the Pelagian issue would never have been out of sight for long. As Patrick began to establish the first firm foundations of the Celtic church in Ireland, his every move would have been reported back to his brethren and rummaged over by "the masters in the art of rhetoric" on mainland Britain.

To the modern reader, accustomed to the abolition of sin yet surrounded by a bewildering chaos of human cruelty, such debates must appear arcane. But if we would ask what made Ireland Catholic, we must look at Patrick; if we wish to meet Patrick the man, we must attempt to know the world that fashioned him.

That world was in turmoil. Many believers thought that the end could not be far off. And Patrick himself makes reference more than once to these "latter days" (Chapters 34, 39, and 40). Linked to this sense of impending doom was the notion that the gospel had to be proclaimed "to the ends of the earth" (and Patrick's barbaric Ireland certainly met that description) before all was at an end. It is an idea that Patrick finds at the very end of Matthew's Gospel: "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached through the entire world, for a testimony among the gentiles, and then the end will come" (Chapter 28). But this is a misreading: Christ bids his apostles to take his message out across the whole world, comforting them with the word that "I am with you always; yes, even to the end of time." Yet Patrick's mission almost seems a race against time; world events are getting worse, there is no time to be lost in carrying out the Lord's work.

As a missionary bishop, Patrick shows full awareness that he has handed his life over to the task. As a boy he is taken to Ireland against his will: As a man he offers himself freely to return. The exchange of life for lives is the kind of barter that imaged Christ's own sacrifice on the cross, and an identification that clearly fired Patrick.

As a young shepherd lad Patrick learned to pray. Prayer clearly infused his whole life. He mentions over and over the divine response—in Chapter 35 he tells us "he would frequently forewarn me of many things by his divine response." Here is a man led by the spirit of God, in constant communication with his word that he has come to preach and teach in Ireland.

The Irish did him no service by painting him green and putting a miter on his head. Patrick the bishop was a real man, holy and passionate. We can still meet him today in the legacy of his writings which he left us.

The Confession of Bishop Patrick

Part I

1

I am Patrick, yes a sinner, and the simplest of peasants,
so that I am despised by the majority of men.
My father Calpornius, who was a deacon,
was the son of Potitus, a priest.
We lived in the town of Bannaventa Berniae,
and outside there was a small holiday villa.
It was here that I was taken captive—
I had no option but to surrender myself,
for I was not yet sixteen years old.
At that time, I did not recognize the True God:
that was why I was taken as a captive to Ireland,
along with many thousands of others with me.
We fully deserved to suffer like this
for we had all “turned our back upon God”;
we “did not keep his commands.”
Not once had we listened to the bidding of our priests,
as they warned us constantly about our salvation.
And so “the Lord let down his anger upon us

and scattered us among the heathen tribes," even "unto the farthest land."

Where now my utter insignificance is plain to see among a strange race.

Is. 59:13, Gen. 26:5, Is. 42:25, Jer. 9:16

2

And there also “the Lord opened my senses to my unbelief,”
so that, though late in the day, I might remember my many sins;
and accordingly “I might turn to the Lord my God with all my heart,”
who “has looked upon my lowliness”
and taken pity on my adolescence, on my ignorance,
and kept safe watch over me before ever I knew him,
yes, even before I had wit enough to tell good from evil.
It was he who strengthened me,
consoling me just as a father comforts his son.

Acts 13:47, Lk. 24:25, Jer. 4:19, Hab. 3:12, Joel 2:12–13, Lk. 1:48

3

Thus far, Patrick's opening account of himself is low key. He is keen to stress his sinfulness and poverty which he contrasts with the loving care of his Father. Yet now his tone changes:

Rather as Paul boasts of Christ's gifts, he, too, must speak out.

Now that he has been corrected by God, he must tell of his wonders.

It is precisely because of all this that I may not stay silent,

"nor indeed would it serve any purpose,"

about the great benefits

and such great grace

which the Lord has seen fit to bestow on me

"in the land of my captivity."

For this reward is handed back to us,

that after our correction we might acknowledge God

"exalting and confessing his wonders before all the nations

that are under the heavens."

II Cor. 12:1 II, Chron. 3:17, Is. 25:1, Acts 2:5

4

Patrick announces his profession, or rule of faith.
His credo, where he is up to at the end of his life,
is laid before God and men:
I need you to know, he explains simply, "the set of
my soul."
As Paul tells the Romans (12:3), "each of you must judge
himself by the yardstick of
the gifts of faith given you by God."

Because there is no other God

nor ever was nor will be in future days,

other than God who is unbegotten Father,

without beginning,

yet from whom is all beginning

and who holds all things in being

as we have come to learn;

and his Son Jesus Christ

whom together with his Father,

we bear witness, has most surely always existed

even before time began,

Begotten spiritually and present with the Father in a manner beyond any human words;

before all time began.

And through him have all things, seen and unseen, been made,

then he himself was made man,

and once death had been overcome, he was received into the heavens with his Father.

“And he has given him full power over every name

in the heavens, on earth

and in the depths beneath

so that every tongue shall confess to him

that Jesus Christ is our Lord and God.”

It is he whom we believe

and we hope he will soon come again,

to be “judge of the living and dead

who will render to each man according to his deeds.”

And “he has poured out abundantly his Holy Spirit upon us,”

given as his pledge of our immortality.

Which Holy Spirit makes us both believers,

obedient “children of God and equal heirs with Christ”:

whom we confess and adore,

one God in the most holy named Trinity.

Phil. 2:9–11, Acts 10:42, Rom. 2:6, Titus 3:5–6, Rom. 8:16–17

5

Patrick rehearses his reasons for speaking out:

He is compelled to testify for fear of judgment.

He himself it was who spoke by the prophet,
"Call on me in the day of your trial
and I will rescue you
and you will know the greatness of my name."
And elsewhere he declares,
"To reveal and publish the deeds of God
brings a man honor."

Ps. 50:14, Tobit 12:7

6

Even if I am imperfect in so many ways,
nonetheless I want my brothers and my family to know my mettle,
so that they may clearly recognize the set of my soul.

7

I am not ignorant of "the testimony of my Lord,"
who testifies so plainly in the psalm,
"You will abandon those who tell lies."
And elsewhere he says,
"The mouth that lies slaughters the soul."
And again in the gospel our Lord says,
"The wasted word which men have spoken,
they will be asked to account for on the day of judgment."

II Tim. 1:8, Ps. 5:6, Wisd. 1:11, Matt. 12:36

8

I cannot fail to be fully aware of these warnings.
Indeed, I “go in fear and trembling” of such a sentence
on that day, when no man will be able to escape or hide himself,
but we shall all “be called to give an account”
even of our least sin
“before the tribunal of Christ our Lord.”

Eph. 6:5, Rom. 4:12, Rom. 14:10, II Cor. 5:10

9

“The wasted word” must be answered for—
Patrick is keenly aware of the power of the word,
especially the written word.
He has hesitated to write, knowing his audience
to be critical.
Yet now he feels compelled.

It is because of this that I have long thought about writing,

but I have hesitated until now,

for I feared that I would “fall a prey to the tongue of men.”

And because I myself did not learn in the same way as others,

who so easily absorbed both their law and sacred literature,

the one as avidly as the other,

and who scarcely changed the way they talked since childhood.

They seemed to polish their perfection without apparent effort.

In contrast all my writing, every word I speak has had to be translated into a foreign tongue.

So easy to taste from the flavor of my writing

how I have been instructed and taught to express myself.

Yet the saying goes, “A wise man’s tongue will be recognized;

the truth must be told, sensibly, wisely, well said.”

Ecclus. 28:23, Ecclus. 4:24

10

Patrick dwells almost obsessively on his lack of learning. He is particularly sensitive about his lack of the verbal skills he sees in others. Yet when he speaks so poignantly of being unable to voice the innermost meaning of his soul, we recognize the tongue-tied mystic who may not utter what he knows in his heart.

But what is the point of making excuses, even if I do tell the truth,

especially since I now have the audacity

in my old age to try and attain something

which I failed to achieve in my youth?

For then my sins stood in my path preventing me from making sense of what I had previously only read in a slipshod way.

Yet who will believe me, even if I repeat what I have already said?

As an adolescent—to be exact, a beardless boy,

I gave myself up as a captive,

before I even knew what I should seek in life and what I should avoid.

So that today I still blush and fear more than anything

to have my lack of learning brought out into the open.

For I am unable to explain my mind to learned people by using words as incisively, as they do—

such as my mind and soul would like,

spitting it out in so many words to make sense of my innermost meaning.

11

But if, in fact, I had been given the same advantages as all the rest,

I would certainly not have stayed silent “for the sake of paying back” the Lord.

It may seem to some of my critics that I appear bold to talk like this,

given that I am short on learning and “slow in my speech.”

But even so it is written,

“stammering tongues will be quick to learn how to speak peace.”

How much more ought we to make this our whole aim, since we are, as it is written,

“the letter of Christ for salvation even to the back of beyond.”

And what does it matter if it is not a learned letter, for it is still to be found,

valid and plain for all to read,

written in your very hearts,

“no, not in ink, but by the Spirit of the living God.”

And again the Spirit testifies,

“even farmwork is fashioned by the Creator on high.”

Ps. 119:12, Exod. 4:10, Is. 32:4, II Cor. 3:2–3, Acts 13:47, Ecclus. 7:15

12

So there it is. I began life more rustic than any man you care to name:

an exile, unschooled—that much is plain—

a man, what's more, "who does not even know how to make out for his future";

yet I am sure in my mind of one thing:

that before I was brought low,

I was like some great stone lying deep in mud,

Until "He who is power" came

And "in his mercy" lifted me up.

Yes, that's how it was, he did indeed raise me up,

for he placed me on the very top of the wall.

And so, because of that, I must shout out loud

"to the Lord in order to give back" some small thing

for all his gifts that are so great both here and in eternity.

The mere mind of man can never plumb such gifts as these.

Eccles. 4:13, Ps. 119:67, Lk. 1:49

13

Now on this account, be amazed “all you who fear God, both great and small,”

and, even you masters in the art of rhetoric,

listen and take careful note.

Who stirred up me, a fool, from the midst of those

who are considered wise and learned in the practice of law,

as well as “persuasive in their speech” and in every other way

and, ahead of these others, inspired me who is so despised by the world,

to be fit to help (if only I could!)

faithfully and “in fear and trembling”

and without any complaint that race of people

to which the love of Christ drew me

and thus spend the rest of my life, if only I might prove worthy;

simply to serve them in humility and truth.

Apoc. 19:5, Lk. 24:9, Heb. 12:28

14

Consequently, in response to our rule of faith in the Trinity

I must take this decision,

disregarding any risks involved,

and make known “the gifts of God

and his everlasting consolation.”

Neither must we fear any such risk

in faithfully preaching God’s name boldly in every place,

so that even after my death a spiritual legacy may be left for my brethren and my children,

so many people in their thousands whom I have baptized in the Lord.

II Thess. 2:16

15

Not that I was in any way worthy nor even the kind of man

that the Lord would grant such a thing to me, his humble servant,

after so many hardships and great burdens,

after my captivity,

after so many years spent living among this people

that he should grant me so great a grace—

something which, as a boy, I could never have hoped for or even dreamt possible.

Part II

16

But after I had come to Ireland,

it was then that I was made to shepherd the flocks day after day,

and, as I did so, I would pray all the time, right through the day.

More and more the love of God and fear of him grew strong within me,

and as my faith grew, so the Spirit became more and more active,

so that in a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers,

and at night only slightly less.

Although I might be staying in a forest or out on a mountainside,

it would be the same;

even before dawn broke, I would be aroused to pray.

In snow, in frost, in rain,

I would hardly notice any discomfort,

and I was never slack but always full of energy.

It is clear to me now, that this was due to the fervor of the Spirit within me.

17

And there on a certain night, I had a dream

in which I heard a voice saying to me,

“You are right to fast, soon you will be returning to your own country.”

And, once again, after only a short while,

I had the response to this mysterious dream for I was told,

“Come and see, where your ship is waiting for you.”

Not that it was near at hand,

rather, it was two hundred miles away,

in a place I had never seen before

and where I knew not a single soul.

And that’s what happened; a little time later, I turned on my heel and ran away,

leaving behind the man to whom I had been bound for six years.

Yet I came away from him in the power of God,

for it was he who was guiding my every step for the best.

And so I felt not the least anxiety until I reached the ship.

18

And on the very day when at last I came to the harbor, I saw a ship being put into the water.

So I spoke up for myself and told the sailors that I had money enough to set sail with them.

But this annoyed the skipper

and he replied angrily, cutting me down to size,

“Don’t get ideas into your head and imagine you are coming with us!”

When I heard him speak like this, I turned on my heel and began to go away from them.

I decided to go back to the little hut where I had been staying,

and on the way there, I began to pray.

But before I could even get my prayers into focus

I heard one of the sailors call after me.

In fact he bellowed at me,

“Hurry up, these men are shouting out for you.”

So straightway I went back to them,

and they all started talking to me at once.

“Come aboard, we will take you as you are;

make friends with us how you will.”

But then and there, I refused to suck their nipples

for I feared God and would not fall in with their pagan ways.

Yet, in spite of this, I still hoped that they might come to have faith in Jesus Christ.

And so that was how I got my way with them,

And directly afterward, we set sail.

19

Three days later, we reached land.

And then, for twenty-eight days we journeyed through a land that was completely barren.

Their food ran out

and so “they grew weak with hunger.”

Finally, one day their leader started to complain to me,

“What have you to say for yourself, Christian?

You boast that your God is all-powerful.

So why can’t you pray for us,

you know how badly hunger threatens us;

it’s beginning to look as if we may not survive to see another living soul.”

But I told them with great confidence,

“ ‘Turn trustingly to the Lord who is my God’ and put your faith in him with all your heart,

because nothing is impossible to him.

On this same day, he will send us food sufficient for our journey,

because for him there is abundance everywhere.”

And with the help of God that is how things turned out.

Suddenly, we saw a herd of pigs right before our very eyes, seeming to block our path.

Wasting no time, they killed a very great number;

and then they camped there for two nights, feasting all the while,

so that they filled their bellies with fleshmeat.

Many of their number had fallen by the wayside

and had been “left behind half-alive” along the road.

After they had eaten, they gave great thanks to God,

and now I was well regarded in their eyes.

For from then on, they had abundant food every day.

They even found some wild honey in the forest,

and “they offered me a portion.”

One man told me, “This is offered in sacrifice.”

But thanks be to God,

I tasted not one mouthful of their find.

Gen. 12:10, Joel 2:12–13, Lk. 10:30, Lk. 24:42, I Cor. 10:28

20

But on the same night, as I lay sleeping,
Satan tempted me full sorely.
The memory will go with me “as long as I stay in this body.”
He fell right over me, like a huge rock,
so that none of my limbs had any strength left in them.
How did I know in my ignorant spirit to cry out to Elias by name?
And while all this was happening to me, I saw the sun rise in the sky,
but still I kept on shouting out “Elias, Elias,” with all the strength I had.
And suddenly, the splendor of that sun flooded over me,
and at once I was rid of my powerlessness.
I fully believe that it was Christ my Lord who came to my aid.
It was his Spirit that cried out so readily for me:
I hope it will be thus “in the day of my pressing need.”
As the Lord testifies, “It will not be you who speak,
but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.”

II Pet. 1:13, Ps. 50:15, Matt. 10:19–20

21

Patrick explains why he submitted to captivity a second time.

So once again, after so many years in captivity, I had to give myself into captivity a second time.

So I had to stay with them on that first night,

but I was reassured by the Divine response telling me,

“You will stay with these men for two months.”

And so it turned out.

On the sixtieth night,

“the Lord delivered me from their hands.”

Gen. 37:21

22

The narrative of the journey continues.

Now he continued to provide us with food on our journey,

as well as fire and dry shelter as each new day arrived,

until on the tenth day we came to a village where there were men living.

As I have already said above,

we journeyed through that wilderness for twenty-eight days,

and on the night of our arrival in the village, it would be true to say that we

had not a bite of food between us.

23

There is a big gap in Patrick's narrative—which, we must remember, he never intended to be in any sense autobiographical.

So now, having been away for these few years, I was once more back in Britain

with my parents,

who welcomed me as their long-lost son.

They begged me to give them my word,

that after suffering so great an ordeal,

I should never leave them again.

But now, as large as life, "I had a vision in my dreams" of a man who seemed to come from Ireland:

his name was Victoricius

and he carried countless letters,

one of which he handed over to me.

I read aloud where it began: "The Voice of the Irish."

And as I began to read these words I seemed to hear the voice of the same men

who lived beside the forest of Foclut,

which lies near the Western sea where the sun sets.

They seemed to shout aloud to me "as if with one and the same voice":

“Holy broth of a boy, we beg you,
come back and walk once more among us.”
I was utterly “pierced to my heart’s core,”
so that I could read no more.
That is how I knew for certain, taught by just such an experience.
Thanks be to God,
after so many years, the Lord was pleased to provide for them,
hearing at last the pleading of their voices.

Dan. 7:13, Dan. 3:51, Acts 2:37

24

And on another night, “I do not know, only God knows,”
whether in me or outside myself,
I heard the most wise words which
as yet I could not comprehend.
Except that right at the very end of that prayer, one of them called out:
“ ‘He who gave his own soul for you,’
He it is who now speaks within your soul.”
And at that, I woke up full of joy.

II Cor. 12:2–3, I Jn. 3:16

25

And once again, I saw him praying within my soul;

it seemed as if I was still inside my body,

and then I heard him above me, that is, over my inner man.

So that there he was, praying with many a groan,

and as all this was happening, I was stunned and kept marveling and wondering

who he might be, who was praying in this wise within me.

But as this prayer was ending, he declared that it was the Spirit.

In such ways I have learned, by my own experience.

And I recalled the words of the Apostle,

"The Spirit comes to support the failings in our prayer.

For we do not know how we should pray as we ought.

But the Spirit himself asks for us, with so many groans that may not be described."

And once more it is written, "The Lord himself is our advocate who asks on our behalf."

Rom. 8:26, I Jn. 2:1

Part III

26

We now come to the heart of Patrick's argument for writing his confession.
A deputation sent by the bishops of England has come to Ireland and to confront him.
He has been betrayed by a man who had been his closest friend:
Thirty years before, on the eve of his ordination as deacon,
Patrick had confessed to
him a sin from his youth. This has now been made
common knowledge and is at the core of
an investigation as to whether he is worthy to remain
a bishop.

When I was attacked by some of my elders who came

and threw my sins at my burdensome office as bishop,

I make no secret, on that day "I took a mighty blow.

I felt at that moment as if I might fall" there and then, and never recover:

yet the Lord spared his stranger in a foreign land,

so kindly is his Name.

Indeed, he bore me up, though I was trampled underfoot in such a way.

For although I was put down and shamed, not too much harm came to me:

I can only pray to God that "this be not counted as a sin against them."

Ps. 118:13, Deut. 24:15

27

“They dug up this pretext against me”—from thirty years before—

a deed I had confessed just before I was made deacon.

My mind was worried and depressed, so that I had confided in my closest friend

something I had done one fateful day as a boy,

to be precise in the space of one hour.

Then I had not yet learned to master my self-control.

“I do not even know, although God surely must,”

whether I was yet fifteen at the time.

Certainly, I did not then believe in the living God,

nor had I since my earliest infancy.

But I still remained in the death of disbelief,

until the time when “I was truly laid low

by hunger, by nakedness”—day after day.

Dan. 6:5, Ps. 119:75, Zech. 2:8

28

Consider the facts in the matter, I did not come back to Ireland of my own accord,

not until I was nearly at the end of my tether.

Yet this whole struggle worked for the best,

since in this way I was reformed by the Lord.

For now he has made me fit and ready to be

something that was once a long way off,

that I should care for

and be busily engaged in saving others.

Whereas before I gave not a second thought even for myself.

29

Therefore on that day when I was called to book

by those I recall now and tell about above,

that very same night, “I saw a vision in the void.”

I stared face-to-face at a script that did me no honor.

Yet even as I stared, I heard the divine response say to me:

“We have grieved to see the face of that man with his name in shreds, he is now a marked man.”

Now he did not say, “You were grieved to see,” but, “We were grieved”;

as though he had included me with himself.

Just as he said: “He that touches you,

it is as if he poked the pupil of my own eye.”

30

It is because of this that “I give him thanks

who has strengthened me” in all my ways,

so that he did not hinder me from setting out upon my journey which I was determined to undertake,

and also from my task which I had learned from Christ my Lord.

But instead, “I felt within myself a formidable strength,”

as my faith was forged before God and in the presence of my fellow men.

I Tim. 1:12, Lk. 8:46

31

Because of I this, “I make bold to say,”
my conscience does not accuse me,
neither now nor in the future.
For “God is my witness
that I have not lied”
in any of these words that I have laid out before you.

Acts 2:9, II Cor. 1:23

32

Patrick is not merely hurt at his former friend's betrayal, but he is dismayed by reports that he had wanted to defend him in his absence.

But I would rather grieve for my own dear friend:

how did we deserve to hear such a statement from him.

I had handed over my own soul to him!

Now I was unable to be present,

not being in Britain at the time,

indeed I had done nothing to initiate the affair.

And yet I heard from some of the brethren

before my case was brought,

that he himself said he would be willing to plead for me in my absence.

Yet it was this same friend, who had once told to my face,

"Mark my words, you are going to be made bishop."

Not that I ever felt worthy of such a position.

So how did he take it into his head afterward,

to dishonor me so publicly, before good and ill alike,

over a matter which before he had been so glad to pardon,

as had the Lord himself, who is "greater than any man."

Jn. 10:29

33

Yet I have said enough.
But still, I may not hide the gift of God,
which he so generously gave us in “the land of my captivity.”
Because then I sought him with such a will
and there I found him.
And he kept me safe from all evils,
“by means of his indwelling Spirit,” so I believe,
who “has continued his working” within me up to this present day.
Again, I am speaking “boldly” in saying so much;
yet, God alone knows, if a mere man had told me this,
perhaps I would have held my peace for the love of Christ.

Rom. 8:11, II Cor. 12:11

34

Because of this, I am never weary of giving thanks to my God,
who has kept me safe “in the day of my trial.”
In such a way that today I may in full confidence offer him a sacrifice
of my soul as “a living victim” to Christ my Lord.
For it is he who “has defended me from all my afflictions,”
so that I may say to him, “Who am I, Lord,”
or what is my calling,
that you have appeared to me in such divine power.
So that today, among the gentiles,
I may praise you ceaselessly
and magnify your name,
wherever I may be.
And this, not merely in good times,
but also in distress.
So that whatever will come my way,
whether good or bad,
I may accept it calmly,
and always give thanks to God,

who has ever shown me
how I should believe in him unfailing without end.
And he has heard and helped me,
so that I, for all my ignorance, should “in these latter days”
dare to undertake this work that is so holy and so wonderful.
Thus, in some small way, I may come to imitate those
whom long ago the Lord foretold would announce his gospel,
“as a sign to all the gentiles before the world comes to its end.”
This is what we have seen, thus has it been fulfilled.
Mark it well, we testify that the gospel has been preached
as far as any man has gone.

Ps. 95:9, Rom. 12:1, Ps. 34:7, II Sam. 7:18, Acts 2:17
Cf. Matt. 24:14

35

But it would be tedious to relate my every labor or even some in part.

But I will say briefly how often our most caring God has freed me from slavery,

and from some twelve dangers in which my very life was at stake.

And there were many other snares besides,

things that I would find it hard to describe in detail;

for I have no wish to bore my readers.

Yet I have God as my authority;

for he knows all things even before they are done,

so that even for me, his poor little pupil,

an ignorant man, he would frequently forewarn me of many things by his divine response.

36

“Where did I come by this wisdom”
which was never in me before,
“for I knew not the number of my days,”
nor did I have the least knowledge of God.
And after this, whence came that gift, so great, so salutary,
to know God and to love him,
although at the cost of losing both my country and my parents?

Matt. 13:54, Cf. Ps. 39:5

37

Patrick had to overcome opposition, not only from his doting family and friends but also from his religious superiors, in order to return to Ireland.
Yet God, he declares,
was his pilot or helmsman who revealed the nature
of his mission.
But when he came to Ireland there were even tougher trials to face.
Refusing every gift from others, he is ready, like St. Paul,
to hand over his body to
prison and even his soul to death
"for the benefit of others."

And many gifts were offered me in sorrow and in tears,

and I upset their donors, much against the wishes of some of my elders;

but with God for my pilot, I refused to acquiesce or give in to them in any way.

I was able to stand firm against them all,

not through any strength of mine, but by God's grace who conquers in me.

So at last I came here to the Irish gentiles to preach the gospel.

And now I had to endure insults from unbelievers,

to "hear criticism of my journeys,"

and suffer many persecutions "even to the point of chains."

Now I was able to hand over the freedom of my birth for the benefit of others.

And should I prove worthy, I am ready and willing to give up my own life,

without hesitation for his name.

Eccles. 29:30, (O.L.) II Tim. 3:9

Part IV

38

There would I be glad to pour out my soul even to the point of death,

if the Lord would so grant it me,

because I am so much in God's debt.

For he gave me such great grace,

that many people through me were reborn to God,

and afterward confirmed and brought to perfection.

And so then a clergy was ordained for them everywhere,

to care for this people freshly brought alive in their faith.

They are those whom the Lord has chosen "from the ends of the earth,"

just as before he had promised by his prophets:

"The gentiles will come to you from the ends of the earth,"

and they will say,

"The false idols which our fathers made are quite useless";

And again: "I have put you as a light among the gentiles,

so that you may be the means of salvation as far as the ends of the earth."

Jer. 16:19, Acts 13:47

39

And there I want to “await his promise,”
for he never deceives,
as he promises in the gospel:
“They shall come from the east and from the west
and they will sit down at table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob”;
just as we believe that the faithful will come from the whole world.

Acts 13:47, Matt. 8:11

40

So therefore it is our duty to fish well and with loving care,

just as the Lord urges and teaches us:

“Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

And again, he says through the prophets,

“Look, I send fishers and many hunters, says God” and so forth.

Because of this, it was vital that we let down our nets

so that “a vast crowd and multitude” might be taken for God.

Also that everywhere there might be priests who might baptize

and teach a needy and willing people.

Just as the Lord says in the gospel

when he urges and teaches, saying,

“Go now, teach all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you,

and see, I am with you all days,

even to the end of the world.”

And again he says, “Go therefore into the whole world,

preach the gospel to every creature.

He who believes and will be baptized shall be saved,

but he who does not believe shall be damned."

And once again, "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached through the entire world,

for a testimony among the gentiles,

and then the end will come."

In the same way, the Lord foretells through the prophets, where he says,

"And it will be in the last days, says the Lord,

that I will pour out my Spirit over all flesh,

and your sons and daughters will see visions,

and your old people will dream dreams,

and assuredly over my servants

and over my handmaids in those days,

I will pour out my Spirit and they will prophesy."

And also in Hosea he says, "A people that is not mine, I will call mine,

and a people who has not received my mercy, I will call one that has known mercy,

And in the place where before it was said, you are not my people,

there they will now be called children of the living God."

Matt. 4:19, Jer. 16:16, Cf. Lk. 16:17, Matt. 28:19–20
Mk. 16:15–16, Matt. 24:14, Acts 2:17–18, Cf. Joel 2:28–29
Rom. 9:25–26 Cf. Hosea 1:9

41

Now how else has it lately come about in Ireland that those who never even knew God,

but up till now had always worshipped nothing but idols and impure things,

are now suddenly made the people of the Lord,

so that they are now called children of God?

Meanwhile, so many sons and daughters of the kings of the Irish

are now proud to be counted monks and virgins of Christ.

42

Here I must tell of one blessed woman, again of a noble Irish family,

grown up here into a most beautiful woman;

for I myself met her when I baptized her.

A few days later, she came back to tell us

that she had received a response from a messenger of God.

He urged her solemnly to become a virgin of Christ,

so that she might draw yet nearer to God.

And thanks be to God,

six days after this, she successfully and eagerly chose

that state shared by all virgins of Christ.

Not that their fathers agree with their decision;

more often than not, they gladly suffer persecution,

yes, and even false charges from their own parents.

Yet, in spite of all, their numbers grow more and more.

Indeed, I scarcely even know the number from among our own race who have been reborn in this way—

not to mention all the widows and other married couples agreeing to live in continence.

Yet it is those women who are kept as slaves who have most to suffer;

they have to bear constant threats and daily terror.

But the Lord has given his grace to so many women who are serving him in this way,

so that even when they are forbidden, they continue steadfastly to follow his example.

43

Patrick is determined to resist any pressure to remove him from his post in Ireland.

And so even if I wanted to leave these women

so as to head home to Britain,

and I would have been only too ready,

not just to see my own country once more and my parents,

not only them,

but also to cross over to Gaul and visit my brothers there,

so that I might once again see the faces of those holy men belonging to my Lord.

God knows only too well how much I longed for that,

yet I am “bound by the Spirit,”

who “testifies to me” that if I do so,

he will mark me out as guilty for the rest of my days.

But what I fear most is to lose the labor I have begun,

and not I alone,

but Christ the Lord,

who bade me come here

and be with them for the rest of my life,

if the Lord so desires.

And he will shield me from every evil,

so that I do no sin in his sight.

Acts 20:22–23

44

I am certain this is what I ought to do,
yet I do not believe in my own powers,
“as long as I shall continue in this mortal flesh,”
because he is strong, who daily strives to turn me away from the faith
and from the purity of religion that is without any pretense
right up to my very last breath in Christ my Lord.
Yet my enemy the flesh continually drags me down to death,
I mean indulgence in illicit pleasures.
And “I well know in part” why I have not led a perfect life,
just like other believers but still I confess my Lord,
and I do not blush for shame in his sight.
Neither do I lie,
for I have known him from my youth,
and the love of God and the fear of him have grown in me,
“and up till now,” by God’s goodwill, “I have kept the faith.”

I Cor. 13:9, II Tim. 4:7

45

Let him who wants mock me and jeer,
I shall not be silent. For I may not conceal those signs and wonders
which the Lord has shown me
many years before they even come to pass,
for he is who knows all things even “before the world began.”

II Tim. 1:9

46

Patrick recalls the difficulties raised by his superiors before they finally approved his mission to Ireland. Some thought him under-educated, others that his project was too dangerous to be contemplated. He blames himself for not listening to the Spirit, even as his superiors stood in his way.

For all of this, I am bound to give God thanks without ceasing.

So often he has overlooked my stupidity, my carelessness,

not just once, nor in only one situation;

time after time, he has held back his full fury from me,

who had been made his chosen helper.

I was unwilling to agree readily with what was being shown me,

nor did I behave as "the Spirit prompted."

Yet in spite of this, the Lord "took pity on me" a "thousand thousand times,"

because he saw within my soul that I was ready.

But I was uncertain what to do about my decision.

For there were many who stood in the way of my mission.

There was always someone talking behind my back

and whispering, "Why does he want to put himself in such danger

among his enemies who do not know God?"

Not that they bore me any malice;

yes, I am the first to admit it,

they did not know how to deal with

my homespun ways and lack of learning.

For myself, I was also slow to recognize to its full extent the grace that was with me then,

whereas now I can see quite plainly what I ought to have done.

Jn. 14:26, Cf. Exod. 20:6

47

Now, after all, I am speaking plainly to my brothers and my fellow servants,

who have trusted me on account of what “I have already said and what I now say,”

in order to build you up and confirm your faith.

If only you would imitate the higher things and do so much better.

This will be my only honor,

For “the wise son

is an honor for his father.”

II Cor. 13:2, Prov. 10:1

48

He addresses his fellow Christians, calling them to testify to his good name. Equally, he calls to his defense the heathens: He has lived among them for so long and has always dealt with them uprightly, keeping the peace.

You yourselves know, just as well as does God, how I have behaved among you, since I was a young man,

with true faith and a sincere heart.

Equally, I have acted in a similar way toward these heathen people among whom I now live.

I have always been straight with them and will continue to keep my word with them.

God knows that "I have not cheated a single one of them."

Nor would I dream of such a thing, for God and for the sake of his church,

lest I should stir up persecution for them and all of us,

or for fear that the name of the Lord should be blasphemed because of me.

For it is written: "Woe to the man through whom the name of the Lord is blasphemed."

II Cor. 7:2, Matt. 18:7

49

Patrick has also been accused of embezzlement and misusing church funds. This he denies in detail.

Although "I may be foolish in all things,"
nonetheless I have tried my best to safeguard myself.
As for my brothers in Christ
and virgins in Christ, as well as holy women,
they would keep on endlessly giving me their little gifts;
they even tossed them onto the altar, trinkets and suchlike.
I gave them back, again and again,
so that I caused offense among them through always doing the same.
But I had firmly fixed my hope upon eternal truths;
In acting cautiously like this, I tried to protect myself
so that they would not catch me out or tarnish my ministry of service,
nor give any chance for unbelievers to criticize or discredit me.

II Cor. 11:6

50

Perhaps when I baptized so many thousands of souls,

I might have hoped for a cent or so from them?

“Just let me know, and I will repay you.”

Or when the Lord ordained his priests in every part,

through my feeble efforts, and as I exercised my ministry freely among them all,

did I ask for so much as the price of a pair of shoes?

“Just let me know, and I will repay you,” yes, and even more.

I Sam. 12:13 (O.L.)

51

On the contrary, I have spent generously on your behalf so that I would be accepted.

I traveled among you and went to every place for your sake,

I was threatened with danger on every side.

I came to the remotest places,

beyond which no man has ever gone

and where no one had ever reached before,

who was able to baptize

or ordain priests

and confirm those people in their faith.

By God's own gift,

I have done all that was needed,

worked tirelessly and with a will for your salvation.

52

At the same time, it is true, I would bring gifts to kings,

and over and above that I made payments to their sons,

who journeyed with me.

In spite of that, on one occasion they took me and my companions prisoner,

and were all set to kill me.

But my time had not yet come.

They laid hands on everything we had,

put me in irons,

and only after fourteen days did the Lord free me from their power.

Moreover, everything that belonged to us was given back, because of God

and thanks to some close friends that we had made before.

53

Again, you know from your own experience

how much I have paid over to those

who administered justice throughout all the districts,

which I visited regularly.

By my own reckoning, I must have paid them not less than the price of fifteen men,

all so that you could continue to enjoy my visits,

and I too might enjoy you in God.

Not that I have any regrets,

indeed I scarcely think it sufficient.

I still spend and I shall be expended yet more.

Such is the power of the Lord that he may still grant me

the grace “to spend my own self for the sake of your souls.”

II Cor. 12:15

Part V

54

“With all my soul I call upon God to be my witness
that I am not lying.”
But I do not write this to you as “an invitation to flattery”
or envy, nor do I hope to receive any honor from you.
The only honor that lasts is what is firmly felt in the heart.
Moreover, “He who is faithful has promised it,
and he never lies.”

II Cor. 1:23, Cf. I Thess. 2:5, Heb. 10:23

55

Yet I am aware, even “in this present world,”
how I am lifted up beyond all measure.
I myself was not worthy nor
do I deserve that he should ever treat me in such a way.
For I know full well
that poverty and adversity would suit me better
than riches and delights.
Yet “Christ the Lord was poor for our sake”;
and I myself am but a wretched failure,
having nothing to my name, even had I wanted worldly goods.
“Nor is this just my own opinion of myself”;
for as every day arrives, I expect
either sudden death or deception
or being taken back as a slave or some such other misfortune.
“But I fear none of these,” since I look to the promises of heaven
and have flung myself into the hands of the all-powerful God,
who rules as Lord everywhere.
As the prophet says: “Throw your thought on God alone

and he will fill your every need.”

Gal. 1:4, II Cor. 8:9, I Cor. 4:3, Acts 20:24, Ps. 55:22

56

Mark it now, “I commend my soul to my God who is utterly faithful,”
for whom, in spite of my obscurity, I act as an ambassador.
Yet since he sees through any falsehood in man,
he himself chose me for this task,
to be one of the least among his servants.

I Pet. 4:19

57

How “shall I now give him due thanks
for all these things that he has showered upon me?”
What can I say to him,
or what can I possibly promise to my Lord?
For I may do nothing
unless he himself has already given it to me.
But only “let him search my heart and my innermost soul”;
for this I desire, yes with all my being. For this I was ready,
that he should permit me to “drink from his chalice,”
just as he gave to others among his lovers.

Eph. 6:20, Matt. 25:40

58

Because of this may God never allow me
to be parted from his own people,
“whom he himself has won” from the ends of the earth.
I pray my God that he will grant me perseverance
and allow me to prove a faithful witness
right up to the time of my passing over, for my God’s sake.

Is. 43:21

59

And if I have ever imitated any good

for the sake of my God whom I so dearly love,

I beg that he would grant me

that I may pour out my blood

in the company of these exiles and captives for his own name.

Yes, and even if my body were to remain unburied,

or my corpse be torn pitifully limb from limb by dogs or wild beasts,

or that birds of the air eat it up.

For I know with utter certainty,

if this should be my lot,

that I shall have gained my soul as well as my body,

because without shadow of doubt on that last day we shall all rise again in the sun's own brilliant blaze;

that is, in the glory of Christ Jesus our Redeemer,

as "children of the living God and fellow heirs with Christ,"

Still "destined to be shaped in his own image";

since "from him and through him and in him" we are going to reign.

Lk. 8:5, I Cor. 15:43, Rom. 8:16–17, 29

60

For this sun which we now see rises each new day for us at his command,

yet it will never reign, nor will its splendor last forever.

On the contrary, all who worship it today will be doomed to dreadful punishment.

But we who believe and adore the true sun that is Christ,

who will never die,

nor “will those who have done his will”

but “abide forever,

just as Christ himself will abide for all eternity”:

who reigns with God the Father all-powerful,

and with the Holy Spirit before time began,

and now and through all ages of ages. Amen.

I Jn. 2:17 (O.L.)

61

Mark well, again and again I will set down the words of this Confession of mine.

I bear testimony in truth and exultation of heart before God and his holy angels

that I have never had any motive

apart from the Gospel and his promises

to return once more to that gentile people

from whom I had escaped with such difficulty.

Cf. II Tim. 4:1, I Tim. 5:21

62

But I beg and beseech all those who believe

and fear God,

whoever comes across this writing

and takes the trouble to read it through,

namely the writing of Patrick, a sinner who, though he was never taught,

wrote it down in Ireland,

that no man ever say, if in my ignorance

I have accomplished any small thing, however trivial,

or if I have shown the way

according to God's good purpose,

that this was my own ignorance at work:

but rather, know and believe it to be the undeniable truth

that it was the gift of God.

This is my Confession

before I come to die.

PATRICK'S LORICA
Deer's Cry *Fáeth Fiada*

Patrick composed this hymn in the time of Loegaire, who was the son of Niall. He wrote it to protect himself and his monks from their many deadly enemies who lay in wait for priests. Now this breastplate of faith is to protect body and soul from devils and men and sin. When anyone uses it each day, carefully seeking God, devils will turn and run. It shall protect them also from every kind of poison and from envy. It shall be a defense against sudden death; it shall protect them after death.

Patrick sang this song when they lay in wait for him as he came to meet Loegaire, who would stop him from going to Tara to sow the seed of Christ. But so it seemed to those who lay in wait, Patrick and his monks were wild deer and a fawn followed after them.

And thus is it called *Deer's Cry*.*

I arise today

in a mighty strength,

calling upon the Trinity,

believing in the Three Persons

saying they are One

thanking my Creator.

I arise today

strengthened by Christ's own baptism

made strong by his crucifixion and his burial

made strong by his resurrection and his ascension

made strong by his descent to meet me on the day of doom.

I arise today

strengthened by cherubims' love of God

by obedience of all angels

by service of archangels

by hope in reward of my resurrection

by prayers of the fathers

by predictions of prophets

by preachings of apostles

by the faith of confessors

by shyness of holy virgins:

by deeds of all holy men.

I arise today

through strength in the sky:

light of sun

moon's reflection

dazzle of fire

speed of lightning

wild wind

deep sea

firm earth

hard rock.

I arise today

with God's strength to pilot me:

God's might to uphold me

God's wisdom to guide me

God's eye to look ahead for me

God's ear to hear me

God's word to speak for me

God's hand to defend me

God's way to lie before me

God's shield to protect me

God's host to safeguard me:

against devil's traps

against attraction of sin

against pull of nature

against all who wish me ill

near and far

alone

and in a crowd.

I summon all these powers to protect me—
against every cruel and wicked powers that stand against me

body and soul

against false prophet's wild words

against dark ways of heathen

against false laws of heretics

against magic and idolatry

against spells of smiths*, witches and wizards

against every false lore that snares body and soul.

Christ protect me today against poison, against burning against drowning, against wounding so that I may come to enjoy your rich reward.

Christ ever with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me

Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me

Christ to my right side, Christ to my left

Christ in his breadth, Christ in his length, Christ in depth*

Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me

Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks to me

Christ in every eye that sees me

Christ in every ear that hears me.

I arise today

in mighty strength

making in my mouth the Trinity

believing in mind Three Persons

confessing in heart they are One

thanking my Creator.

Salvation is from the Lord

Salvation is from the Lord

Salvation is from Christ

May your salvation

Three Lords

Be always with us.

* Patrick almost certainly did not write the Lorica, or Breastplate, more delightfully known as the *Fáeth Fiada* (it may even be as late as 700), yet it breathes his spirit, for it tells how much of a pitched battle Patrick must have waged against the druids of the pagan world he had come to turn. Patrick and his priests slipping through on their way to Tara is magic stuff—Benin the boy is Benignus (the priest who can be trusted, for "I taught him since he was a lad"). He will succeed Patrick as bishop. Written in Gaelic, save only the last stanza: I base my version on an early translation to be found in *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus Volume 2*, kindly supplied by the London Library.

* The most feared spell was for the smith to "turn his anvil," that is, upside down. It must have been regarded as the ultimate show of strength—a show of anger—by the strongest man in the clan.

* Eph. 3:18 "This is what I pray, kneeling before the Father … that Christ may live in your hearts. Planted in love and built on love … that you will have the strength to grasp the breadth, the length, the height, the depth; until knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all understanding, you are filled with the utter fullness of God."

THE CONFESSION OF ST. PATRICK AND LETTER TO COROTICUS

John Skinner

Doubleday